DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 300 TM 026 023

AUTHOR Musthafa, Bachrudin
TITLE Assessment Strategies for Optimal Literacy Acquisition.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 23p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; *Educational Assessment; Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Methods; Feedback; *Literacy; Multiple Choice Tests; Sociocultural Patterns; *Standardized Tests; *Test Use
IDENTIFIERS *Alternative Assessment; Social Constructivism

ABSTRACT

Current conceptions of literacy and what being literate means are discussed, and the strengths and weaknesses of the standardized multiple-choice test as a tool for assessing literacy proficiency and a way to report learning progress are explored. The possible advantages of alternative assessment strategies are reviewed, and an assessment model is proposed to ensure the optimal acquisition of literacy and external accountability. Literacy is a complex phenomenon, not a monolithic state with processes that can be captured by a single instrument. It has been argued that the standardized multiple-choice test format has driven instruction toward lower-order cognitive skills, and that such a test puts both teacher and learner in passive, reactive roles. The available standardized testing system rests on the faulty assumptions that literacy is a unitary state of being and that its development follows a linear line. Alternative assessment, regardless of the terms used to label it, is alternative to standardized achievement tests in that it examines learners' performances on significant tasks related to real-life achievement outside the classroom. The process-oriented and classroom-embedded nature of alternative assessment holds the promise of giving useful feedback for the improvement of instruction. Theories of social constructivism and sociocultural perspectives have indicated that learning is inherently social. To promote real learning, a model based on these theories suggests that it is important to align the curriculum with the child's individual growth, to understand classroom assessment procedures, and to know class members and their abilities. (Contains 35 references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 403 300

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
BACHRUDIN MUSTHAFA

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES
FOR
OPTIMAL LITERACY ACQUISITION

by

Bachrudin Musthafa

School of Teaching and Learning
College of Education
The Ohio State University

Assessment for literacy development...

TM026023

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES FOR OPTIMAL LITERACY ACQUISITION

Bachrudin Musthafa
School of Teaching and Learning
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio, USA

As professionals teachers of literacy have to serve two masters: their clientele who uses their professional service, and their own professional calls as informed by current research. The two forces, however, do not always go hand in hand. As Pearson & Valencia (1987) have observed, the externally-imposed "accountability" and teachers' professional prerogative have not been in a good balance. That is, the accountability required of the teachers by general public, local as well as state school boards, which is generally embodied in "objective" measures such as objective multiple-choice test scores, has created considerable conflicts in the teachers as the latter consider the measures that the clientele requires are not the best learning evidence the profession can actually offer.

This article will (1) discuss current conception of literacy and what being literate currently entails (2) discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the currently predominant standardized multiple-choice test as a tool for assessing literacy proficiency and as a mode of reporting learning progress, (3) elaborate on the alternative assessment strategies with their possible advantages and

limitations, and (4) propose an assessment model in order to ensure learners' optimal literacy acquisition and external accountability.

LITERACY: MULTIPLE FORMS, FUNCTIONS AND MEANINGS

While its importance is very well acknowledged, literacy is a difficult concept to define. The term literacy can mean different things to different people. This is so because when defining literacy, different people emphasize different aspects or forms of its manifestation.

At one time in the past, for instance, someone was considered literate when she was able to sign her own name; another time when she had reached a certain grade level in school; and still another when she could score above a predetermined point on a test (McKenna & Robinson, 1993). At the present time, however, those criteria are no longer considered adequate, as real-life demands have expanded as reflected in the following examples. Mikulecky (1990) has defined literate persons as those who are able to use reading, writing, and written materials effectively in the environment in which they live and work.

More specifically, McKenna & Robinson (1993) have specified

four different aspects of literacy: emergent, functional, workplace, and content literacies. Emergent literacy refers to the young children's reading and writing behaviors that precede and develop into conventional literacy (Sulzby, 1991). Functional literacy generally denotes the ability to use reading and writing to adequately function in one's environment, including in one's job. Workplace literacy refers to working skills (e.g., keyboarding, programming, problem solving) which enable someone to participate effectively and efficiently in a wide variety of working situations. Content literacy means "the ability to use reading and writing for the acquisition of new content in a given discipline" (McKenna & Robinson, 1993, p. 8).

Using literacy tasks as categories to analyze a body of data from literacy acts of young adults, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has proposed three kinds of literacy: prose, document and quantitative literacies (NAEP, 1976 cited in Kirsch, 1990)

On the basis of his own research and that of others, Mikulecky (1990) concludes that literacy processes vary considerably to reflect the pluralism of contexts in which literacy is used. This generalization gains considerable support from empirical research. For instance, data from a naturalistic study with preschool children

conducted by Kantor, Miller, & Fernie (1992) indicated clearly that each context's activities in which children were engaged, materials they used, and the structure of their participation in the literacy events framed literacy use in different ways. Concluding their research findings, Kantor, Miller, & Fernie (1992) have this to say:

> Thus, there was no one path of becoming literate, multiple paths linking literate action with wider social action. Literacy was multifaceted and transformative, in keeping with the larger developmental and cultural concerns of the classroom community (p.200).

In summary, literacy is a very complex phenomenon. It has multiple forms, functions, and meanings. As literate behavior represents a function of the interaction among various factors--including who does it for what purpose and under what circumstances--literacy is not a monolithic state of being whose processes can be accurately captured by one single instrument.

OBJECTIVE MEASURES: USES AND CONSEQUENCES

It has been widely known that the process through which children's literacy learning and development is monitored and examined is currently dominated by multiple-choice, product

oriented, group administered, norm referenced reading-writing tests. Commonly referred to as "standardized tests," these instruments usually serve management functions, as they are intended to inform decisions made by people other than the classroom teacher. According to Johnston (1987), the goal of all of this is to efficiently collect objective data which can be used for various different purposes such as students' classification, monitoring of learning, and school/teacher accountability.

The practice of externally mandating testing system such as this one has resulted in adverse effects. Most serious among them are discussed here. One is that the fit-for-all standardized multiple-choice test format drives literacy instruction, casting both the teacher and learners in fundamentally adversarial roles which preclude effective literacy teaching and learning. More specifically, as Darling-Hammond (1994) has observed, the test has driven the instruction toward lower order cognitive skills--that is, the classwork is geared toward recognizing the answers to multiple-choice questions. Also the mandated standardized test puts both the teacher and learners in passive, reactive roles, rather than encourages children to develop into independent learners and allows the teacher to serve as a question framer and problem solver.

The results of the test, which are necessarily represented in

standardized figures to enable comparability across students in different classes and schools, do not give sufficiently meaningful feedback for improvement in instruction. The global, catchall score resulting from the standardized test precludes strategic improvement for the ensuing instruction.

While it is indeed easy to line up test takers into percentiles and put them into some hierarchical order, the resultant ranks do not tell much of what the students should do in order to improve their literacy learning. The failure to give useful feedback for teaching improvement leads to another problem. That is, the test scores leave parents-- one of the very important stake holders-- in the dark. In this sense, that is to say, the currently predominant test system fails to serve the functions for which it is initially intended.

All in all, the available standardized testing system is seriously flawed because it rests on faulty assumptions (Neil & Medina, 1989; Tierney & McGinley, 1993). That is, the assumptions that literacy is a unitary state of being, and that literacy development follows a linear line are contrary to current knowledge available to the profession (Rowe, 1994; Kantor et al., 1992)

ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT: ITS PROMISES AND CHALLENGES

The increasing criticisms of standardized multiple-choice tests as being too simplistic and too biased toward a certain social group, coupled with obvious adverse effects of high-stakes testing programs such as the emergence of measurement-driven instruction and teaching-to-the-test practices, have collectively sparkled the increasing interest in alternative assessment.

The alternatives to standardized tests have been labeled differently, with the most common labels being direct assessment, authentic assessment, performance assessment, and the more generic: alternative assessment. Although these various labels might reflect slight differences in emphasis, they all share two common characteristics. They are all seen as alternatives to the traditional standardized, multiple-choice, selected-answer achievement tests. Second, they all mean direct examination of learners' performances on significant tasks relevant to real-life outside of the classroom (Worthen, Borg, & White, 1993). As attempts are made to directly see, examine, and judge learners's actual performance real-life(like) tasks (as opposed to indirect examination through "proxy" tasks as commonly done in the traditional testing system), alternative assessment seems to have the potential of enriching and expanding the nature of information

that can be expected from an assessment system.

That is to say that alternative assessment, which is embedded in classroom life, has a better chance of capturing fuller pictures of what is going on before, during, and after certain significant literacy acts, as it has developed various strategies to "monitor" them. More specifically, such an assessment can focus on one of three aspects of learning: processes (e.g., using learning logs, think-aloud observation session, self-assessment checklist, etc.), products (e.g., writing folios, art folios, exhibits, learning logs, etc.), and physical performances such as oral presentation, debates, dramatic enactment, typing, etc.

One major strengths of alternative assessment is the fact that it brings together assessment and instruction in the natural, complex fabric of classroom life. It is therefore not surprising that both teachers and learners will find it empowering. The alternative assessment is said to empower teachers because the development and practice of authentic assessment cast the teachers in the role of problem-framers and problem solvers who use their classroom and school experiences to build an empirical knowledge base to inform their practice and strengthen their effectiveness (Hammond, 1994). Learners (will) find authentic assessment empowering because it appreciates and "gives" control over their

learning processes. This is because, as indicated earlier, authentic assessment is process-oriented which strongly emphasizes the development of continual self evaluation so that learners might be responsible for and direct their own learning--The development of self evaluation is critical if children are to develop into independent learners (Johnston, 1987).

Perhaps lured by its seductive promises, according to a recent observation by Herman (1991), no less than twenty-five states in the USA have now begun or are considering officially adopting alternative assessment. As a new comer, however, alternative assessment has some challenges to take, such as issues related with efficiency of its use for a large scale purposes; its efficacy in assessing complex thinking skills; acceptability to education's stake holders; appropriateness for high-stake assessment (Worthen, Borg, & White, 1993).

The concern about the efficiency of using authentic (or portfolio) assessment for a large-scale population of students is understandable as evaluating learners' authentic stuff (e.g., judging learners' writing improvement from one draft to another) will cost more time (and in other cases it may mean more money) than "scantron scoring of multiple-choice tests' bubble answer sheets" (Worthen et al., 1993, p.428). Responding to this concern, we can

cite a report described in Moss et al. (1992) which states that, with practice, teachers "could work through a portfolio typically containing six to seven sequences of writing in about half an hour." (p.19) Thirty minutes per student work is not too much considering the relative complete picture the teachers can capture of the student's learning progress.

As indicated in foregoing paragraphs, research has found that test-driven instruction tends to lead learners to work on low-level cognitive tasks, such as identifying correct answers to multiple-choice questions (Darling-Hammond, 1994). A question about relative complexity of thinking process can also be posed to evaluator of learners' portfolio: How can you know that a student engages in a complex thinking process rather than just recitation? This question is important because assessment of complex thinking is supposed to be one of the strengths of alternative assessment.

The concern about the possibility of rejection from parents needs to be anticipated because some parents, for some reason, want to know their children's academic standing relative to other kids (Worthen, Borg, & White, 1993). This parental concern directly "hits" one of the most fundamental theoretical positions of alternative assessment: that is that everybody is unique and learns in their own idiosyncratic way and at their own pace. How can the

teacher compare one student's academic standing with that of another? This is one small question that educators and proponents of authentic assessment need to answer.

In summary, alternative assessment, which is process-oriented and classroom-embedded, holds the promise of giving useful feedback for improvement of instruction. While promising, however, alternative assessment also faces some challenges, of which the most important is getting acceptance and support from education's key stakeholders-- legislators, school boards, parents, teachers, students, and associations of professional educators, etc. The extent to which authentic assessment can be accepted by those key figures will determine its viability as an assessment strategy.

At present, the legislators, school boards and other administrators are still fond of some forms of standardized measures as they allow for handy comparison across classrooms, schools, districts, and states (Pearson & Valencia, 1987). This handy comparison gives the administrators easy yardsticks against with relative success of program implementation ("accountability") can be assessed. The challenge for alternative assessment movement is then how to address this accountability demand.

LEARNING COMMUNITY AND ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING & ACCOUNTABILITY

Recent learning theories such as social constructivism (as initially conceptualized by Vygotsky) and sociocultural (or peer culture) perspective (Corsaro) have given us insights into children's learning and development. The basic tenets of social constructivism are that (1) knowledge and knowing originate from social interaction, (2) learning proceeds from social to individual plane with the assistance of knowledgeable members of the culture, and (3) language mediates experience, transforming mental functions (McCarthey, 1994). Sociocultural perspective views classroom as a cultural context, where participants (learners, teachers, and other "civitas academica") construct a common culture through their everyday interactions. Language and literacy, in sociocultural perspective, is defined and given meaning within this cultural context (Kantor, Miller, & Fernie, 1994).

Using the two perspectives as a framework we can safely say that literacy learning, like all learning, is inherently social. In order to promote learning, as the two theoretical perspectives suggest, all learning materials and instructional interaction should be contextualized in terms of culturally relevant activities. This means that all intervention efforts (i.e., instruction and

assessment) should be learner-centered.

While learner-centeredness means putting learners at the center of our concern, it does not mean that the teacher, as a member of the jointly constructed classroom culture, does not have the "right" to carry out her teacherly agenda. She can, and she should. Classroom as a cultural context necessarily comprises school culture (colored by teacher's initiative and/or sanction) plus peer culture, which is always present, as the children (which share sets of values, beliefs, and ways of behaving) assign their own cultural meaning to whatever literacy act they do (Kantor, Miller & Fernie, 1992).

As suggested earlier, as a culture classroom life is marked by constant social negotiations among its members as to what to do, how and why they are to do it. In instructional terms, we can say that while learners will somehow construct their own meaning of whatever they do in the classroom, as indicated in Kantor et al.'s (1992) data, the children will accept the teacher's agenda as part of herself consistent with her status as a "more knowledgeable member of the culture."

The children's acceptance of their teacher may be grounded in their developing knowledge of the social world, where the schooling business is situated. Given the thinking, I should suggest that the

teacher as an instructor, assessor of children's literacy learning and development, and responsible professional view her various roles integrally and focus on facilitating children's learning. In doing all of this, the following general guidelines may be useful.

o Alignment of instruction with children's individual growth

As suggested earlier, literacy learning is developmental, and literacy development does not follow a rigid time table, as it is influenced by some intrinsic factors beside those from social environment. Understanding that these developmental differences are to be expected represents an important source of knowledge in designing curriculum and instructional procedures. For the curriculum plan to be effective, it must account for the developmental differences among the language learners.

The purpose of assessment is therefore to follow the literacy growth of each child so that the appropriate planning may take place.

o Knowing Classroom Procedures

In addition to the ability to see and hear patterns in literacy development, professional teachers should have procedural knowledge (Shullman, 1987) of classroom assessment, including

knowing how to set a context so that certain behaviors are most likely to occur, how to record those behaviors, file and update the records, and prevent some children from being missed. She should also know how to take and interpret regular running records of oral reading behaviors and use them to describe reading growth. About writing the teacher should know how to keep writing files, schedule interviews with individual learner, plan and carry out daily observations of the children's independent literacy behaviors. About classroom management she should know how to facilitate children's engagement in literacy activities and to set back from instruction and kidwatch collectively, or work uninterrupted with particular learners.

With this knowledge-base expertise the teacher ensures her professional accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1989), as her professional knowledge-base expertise is the essential ingredient of her accountability as a professional.

o Knowing own classroom members and what is expected of them

Realizing that instructional time and children's attention are limited, a professional teacher needs to be strategic in her planning and facilitating children's literacy activities. She also makes herself informed of what is expected of the children in her

class and, to the extent possible, what is expected of those in other classes of the same level. She uses her knowledge of this "societal expectation" as a guide for her instructional planning, and as a framework for curriculum development.

Included in this sort of knowledge is information on format, coverage, and content of externally mandated test and curriculum, as appropriate.

With this data-base knowledge of societal expectations, once in a while, the teacher can use "teachable moments" to introduce and familiarize learners with the testing system they will likely have to take. Things related to testing (and test-taking techniques) are introduced as part of instruction in general (general knowledge / social skill).

In other words, assessment-- of which test is only a part-- is there to promote learning.

References

DARLING-HAMMOND, L. (1994). Performance-based assessment and educational equity. Harvard Educational Review, 64 (1), 5 - 30.

DARLING-HAMMOND L. (1989). Accountability for professional practice. Teachers College Record, 94 (1), 59 - 80.

DIEZ, M.E., and MOON, J.C. (1992). What do we want students to know?...and other important questions. Educational Leadership (May), 38 - 41.

JOHNSTON, P (1993). Assessment and literate "development". The Council Chronicle (November), 17 - 20.

JOHNSTON, P. (1987). Teachers as evaluation experts. The Reading Teachers (April), 744 - 754.

ELLIOTT, E.J., and HALL, RON (1985). Indicators of performance: Measuring the educators. Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Summer), 6 - 9.

HANEY, W. (1985). Making testing more educational. Educational Leadership (October), 4 - 13.

HENK, W.A. (1993). New directions in reading assessment. Reading and Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties (9), 103 - 120.

HERMANN, F., and WILLIAM, P.L. (1984). Writing assessment in Maryland. Educational Leadership (Spring), 23 - 24.

HERMAN, J.L. (1992). What research tells us about good assessment.Educational Leadership (May), 74 - 78.

HERMAN, J.L., and GOLAN, S. (1993). The effects of standardized testing on teaching and schools. Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Winter), 20 - 41.

JAEGER, R.M. (1987). Two decades of revolution in educational measurement? Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Winter), 6 - 13.

KANTOR, R., MILLER, S., & FERNIE, D. (1992). Diverse paths to literacy in a preschool classroom: A sociocultural perspective. Reading Research Quarterly, 27 (3), 185 - 201.

KIRSCH, I. (1990). Measuring adult literacy. In R. Valenzky, D. Wagner, & B. Ciliberti (Eds.), Defining Literacy (pp. 40 - 46).

McKENNA, M., & ROBINSON, R. (1993). Teaching Through Text. New York, New York: Longman.

MEHRENS, W.A. (1992). Using performance assessment for ccountability purposes. Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Spring), 3 - 9.

MEHRENS, W.A.(1984). National test and local curriculum: Match or mismatch?Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Fall), 9 -

15.

MEREDITH, V.H. (1984). Issues in direct writing assessment: Problem identification and control. Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Spring), 11 - 35.

MIKULECKY, L. (1990). Literacy for what purpose? In R. Venezky, D. Wagner, & B. Ciliberti (Eds.), Defining Literacy (pp.24 - 34). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

MOSS, P.A. et al.(1992). Portfolios, accountability, and an interpretive approach to validity. educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Fall), 12 - 21.

MULLIS, I.V. (1984). Scoring direct writing assessment: What are the alternatives? Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Spring), 16 - 18.

PEARSON, P., & VALENCIA, S. (1987). Assessment, accountability, and professional prerogative. In J. Readence & R. Baldwin (Eds.), Research in Literacy: Merging Perspectives. (Thirty-six Yearbook of The National Reading Conference). Chicago: National Reading Conference.

POPHAM, W.J. (1992). A Tale of two test-specification strategies. Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Summer), 16 - 22.

POPHAM, W.J. (1993). Educational testing in America: What's

right, what's wrong? A Criterion-referenced perspective. Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Spring), 11 - 14.

QUELLMALZ, E.S. (1984). Toward successful large-scale writing assessment: Where are we now? Where do we go from here? Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Spring), 29 - 35.

ROWE, D. (1994). Preschoolers as Authors. Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc.

SHULLMAN, L.S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. Harvard Educational Review, 57 (1), 1 - 22.

STIGGINS, R.J. (1985). Improving assessment where it means the most: In the classroom. Educational Leadership (October), 69 - 74.

STIGGINS, R.J., and Conklin, N.F. (1986). Classroom assessment: A Key to effective education. Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Summer), 5 - 17.

STIGGINS R.J. (1992). High quality classroom assessment: What does it really mean? Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (Summer), 35 - 39.

TIERNEY, R.J., and McGINLEY, W. (1993). Serious flaws in written literacy assessment. In A. Carrasquillo, & C. Hedley (eds.), Whole Language and the Bilingual Learner (Ch. 7, ps. 107 - 115). Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Company.

WIGGINS, G. (1989). A true test: Toward more authentic and

equitable assessment. Phi Delta Kappan (May), 703 - 713.

WOLF, D.P., LeMAHIEU, P.G., and ERESH, JoANNE (1992). Good measure: Assessment as a tool for educational reform. Educational Leadership (May), 8 - 13.

WORTTHEN, B., BORG, W., & WHITE, K. (1993). Measurement and Evaluation in the Schools. New York, New York: Longman.

VENEZKY, R., WAGNER, D., & CILIBERTI, B. (Eds.)(1990). Toward Defining Literacy. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.